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SUBJECT: VIEWS FROM KANO ON SHARIA, HISBAH, AND THE U.S.

Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: On July 28, PolOff met with members of the Kano Sharia Implementation Council, including Barrister Muzzamil Sani Hanga, to discuss the hisbah, Sharia impact and popularity, inter-faith relations, and America's image in Kano. Among the Council's primary concerns at present are hindering the prevalence of locally produced "immoral and illicit" movies and combating rampant begging in Kano. Hanga believed that foreign charities that operated previously in Kano had been abruptly terminated by pressure from the U.S.) contributing to a sometimes negative image of America in the North of Nigeria. END SUMMARY.

HISBAH: USE PERSUASION, NOT FORCE

12. (U) Muzzamil Sani Hanga, member of the Kano Sharia Implementation Council) comprising professors, Common law barristers, entrepreneurs, female politicians, and Islamic scholars educated in Nigerian seminaries) observed that the Council's principal vocation is the "improvement of social infrastructure and human development." It aimed, in addition, to "respond to the needs" of the disenfranchised and unemployed. To that end, the Council introduced the notion of the 'hisbah') a cadre of 30,000 males employed by Kano State to "help people live by the precepts of Sharia." The hisbah intervened in family disputes, assisted in traffic control, ensured order and fair-pricing in the marketplace, volunteered in hospitals, and administered people's courts. Hanga insisted that the hisbah "augmented the function of the Imam," employing persuasion, not force.

SHARIA: INTEREST, IMPACT

13. (U) Interest in the Sharia's legislative authority persists, averred Hanga, since its "more putative aspects" had not been enforced in Kano. Regarding recent media reports that women were barred from riding "Okadas" (motorcycle taxis that are the most common form of public transport in Nigeria), Hanga said that in response to complaints filed by women for "dignified transport" the Kano State Government) at the request of the Council) purchased 50 Indian-manufactured motor-carriages for women's exclusive usage. Hanga claimed that "most" women preferred the motor-carriages, stressing that non-Muslim women were not obliged to obey the ruling. This suggests that Muslim women are required to take the motor-carriages, though there was no indication of how this was enforced.

14. (U) Hanga said Sharia would remain a decisive factor in the 2007 elections. Voters, including members of the Council, would judge candidates based on their perceived adherence to sustained implementation of Sharia in Kano.

KANO FILMS: "MOST SERIOUS" PROBLEM

15. (U) Hanga argued that the "most serious" problem facing Kano was the challenge the local film industry poses to society's conception of "morality and decency." Producers corrupted public order through the promulgation of films exhibiting explicit language, graphic violence, and pornographic imagery. While the censorship board, under the purview of the Council, successfully had thwarted the popularity of foreign films since its inception in 2000, the sheer volume (10 films/daily) and low-cost (250 Naira/film) of locally made movies hampered significantly the Council's ability to enforce Sharia-legislated censorship rulings. Dismantling this industry was the Council's principal priority.

QURANIC SCHOOL CHILDREN

16. (U) The Council estimated that millions of children, aged 3-13, attend one of Kano's more than 20,000 Quranic schools. Approximately 25% of these students went on to receive further education, whether in State-administered or Islamiyya schools. Often students came from the poorest families and relied solely on schools to provide basic needs, including food and clothing. To attempt to discourage rampant begging, the Council in concert with civil servants and private citizens, disbursed funds to feed these children directly.

INTER-COMMUNAL RELATIONS

17. (U) When asked about the state of inter-communal, specifically Christian-Muslim relations in Kano, Hanga said

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that the Council regularly liaised with leading Christian organizations in Kano. Before enacting the prohibition on the consumption and sale of alcohol in Kano, for example, the Council consulted with Christian groups, helping to "allay fears" that the Sharia ruling would impinge unfairly upon minority rights.

AMERICA'S IMAGE

18. (U) According to Hanga, while Kano residents generally viewed the U.S. favorably, continued support for Israel's military campaign against Hezbollah would only tarnish America's image. Hanga inquired about the veracity of claims that U.S. troops were stationed in Nigeria to train Nigerian soldiers in combat. He thought the U.S. should maintain only "civic dealings" with Nigeria or else arrange for Nigerian troops to train in the U.S. PolOff clarified that the U.S. maintains no troop presence in Nigeria.

19. (C) Hanga said the Council had accepted foreign funding for charitable efforts to combat poverty in Kano, but these organizations were significantly "less active" at present. He speculated that recent anti-terrorism measures taken by the GON to clamp down on Islamic charities resulted from pressure exerted by the USG. Similar claims were pronounced by Grand Qadi of Kwara State, M.A. Ambali, in an August 2 meeting. Ambali added that both Saudi Arabia and Egypt previously had established schools, provided books and scholarships for study abroad, and funded clinics in Ilorin "until America stopped them from doing so."

COMMENT

10. (C) The Kano Sharia Implementation Council is primarily interested in ethical issues and how Sharia can be used to address them. The Council appears organized, determined, and (somewhat) responsive to the concerns of Kano residents, ostensibly garnering it authority among the general populace.

This could translate into political influence over large segments of Kano society. Kano is rife with social problems including high unemployment, lack of adequate education and healthcare, and deteriorating infrastructure. Despite these problems, it is unsurprising, in light of the conservatism of Kano, that thwarting the popularity and wide-spread availability of films deemed immoral is the Council's main objective. Moreover, maintaining an acceptable moral order will continue to figure conspicuously in any reforms introduced by the Council. As an historical nexus of commerce and cultural activity in the north, trends in Kano can and will be replicated elsewhere. Given the current state of socio-economic malaise in Kano, however, one would assume that more measures would be taken to tangibly address these issues, rather than widening the mandate of the hisbah to 'police' residents (perhaps, with impunity) and focusing efforts on media censorship. Despite Hanga's characterization of the hisbah as advisory, the institution of the 'hisbah' is likely modeled after the Saudi Arabian 'mutawwain'.

¶11. (SBU) In general, the Council seems indifferent to the U.S., though critical of some U.S. policies vis-a-vis the Islamic world. While the widespread belief that U.S pressure has stemmed the flow of funds from Islamic charities may be conjecture, Ambali and Hanga highlighted the negative impact this perception has had on America's standing among the "majority" of Muslims in northern Nigeria.
CAMPBELL